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# ***END OF ACTIVITY REPORT***

## **ACFID Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop**

**For ethical research and evaluation in  
development**

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## 1. Introduction

This report details the purpose, process and reflects on the learning outcomes of a Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop held on 30 June 2014 in Melbourne. The document also presents numerous opportunities and challenges for the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and its members in providing guidance and support for NGOs in the conduct of ethical research and evaluation in development. The document captures ideas reported by workshop participants and also reflects on implications of the workshop learning outcomes for supporting NGOs in the conduct of ethical research.

## 2. Background

ACFID seeks to support its members in ethical practice as stated in the ACFID Code of Conduct: “A key purpose of ACFID is to equip and encourage members to observe the highest ethical standards in all their activities”.<sup>1</sup> A key source of support is the *Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development*, which were endorsed by the ACFID Executive Committee in June 2013. The Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop was carried out to strengthen understanding within ACFID and among its members of:

- what the *ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation* mean in practice
- how an ethics committee assesses research in development, and what this means for NGO practitioners seeking to both implement and demonstrate ethical research practices
- how best to support NGOs to conduct ethical research in development.

The workshop further sought to generate opportunities for ongoing collaboration between NGOs on ethical issues. A total of 28 people (23 women and 5 men) attended the workshop, representing a wide range of Australian based NGOs (15 NGOs), academic institutions (6 universities) and government departments, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The workshop was facilitated by Keren Winterford of the Institute for Sustainable Futures and supported by Meghan Cooper of ACFID.

### 2.1 *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*

The Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop sought to explore how industry standards (i.e. the ACFID Code of Conduct) together with Australian standards of ethical research can support research in development, particularly that which is conducted by NGOs.

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated March 2014)<sup>2</sup>, (referred to hereafter as ‘the National Statement’) states that “research conducted overseas by researchers from Australian institutions must comply with this National Statement”.<sup>3</sup> The National Statement also specifies the need for review of research:

Institutions must see that any human research they conduct or for which they are responsible is: (a) designed and conducted in accordance with the Australian code

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<sup>1</sup> ACFID Code of Conduct, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007* (Updated March 2014). The National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Council and The Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> National Statement, p. 65.

for the responsible conduct of research<sup>4</sup>; and (b) ethically reviewed and monitored in accordance with this National Statement.<sup>5</sup>

The National Statement specifies that a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) must review “all research that involves more than low risk”,<sup>6</sup> or that includes participants from specific vulnerable populations.<sup>7</sup>

For the Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop, the committee was formed and the meeting conducted in line with the National Statement. Reflections were designed to explore the practice of a review process of development research as defined in the National Statement and what this means for applying the *ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation* in practice.

## **2.2 Scoping Report and Workshop Preparation**

A background scoping paper on Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) was prepared as a basis for developing the Mock Ethics Committee Terms of Reference and guidance materials to support the mock ethics committee meeting. The scoping paper drew on Australian standards and a range of national and international committee terms of references across academic and not-for-profit sectors. Codes of practice, guidelines and standards, and existing examples of ethics committee review processes were also reviewed. The scoping paper considered how these could best be applied and/or adapted to support ACFID members in the context of development work.

A Mock Ethics Committee was formed and briefed prior to the workshop. The committee composition was in line with the National Statement requirements. Committee members were provided with relevant background material including committee Terms of Reference, *Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development* and other documentation prior to the workshop, to inform them of their roles and responsibilities.

A research application form was prepared and researchers invited to submit research applications for committee review. The research application was developed in line with the *ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development*. Three research applications were received and reviewed individually by committee members before the workshop. Written comments from individual committee member reviews were provided before the workshop to the three research applicants.

## **2.3 Mock Ethics Committee Meeting and Reflection**

The one day workshop was structured in three parts: (1) welcome-introductions and close-reflections, (2) a Mock Ethics Committee meeting to review research applications, and (3) reflection processes.

During the workshop the Committee conducted a meeting at which the research applications were considered and discussed by committee members and the Committee made recommendations for revisions to ensure ethical research.

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<sup>4</sup> *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research 2007*. The National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Council and The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>5</sup> National Statement, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> National Statement, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> National Statement, p. 69.

The mock ethics review process was carried out through an action-learning approach in ‘a fish bowl’ setting; while other workshop participants were acting as observers of the committee deliberations. In between each review of a research application committee members and observers were invited to ‘come out of roles’ to reflect together, as workshop participants, on what they had experienced and observed during the committee meeting process.

While the Mock Ethics Review process provided an opportunity to explore the ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development as they apply to ‘real research’, it is important to note that the process was truncated to provide opportunities for reflection and learning. As a ‘mock’ process, the exercise served to generate insights, enable learning and encourage reflection on the implications of the principles in practice and how best to support NGOs to conduct ethical research in development.

## **2.4 Workshop Reflection and Learning**

Plenary and small group work also provided further opportunities for reflection on the process, sharing of insights and discussing implications for the future.<sup>8</sup> Following the morning Mock Ethics Committee meeting, the afternoon sessions provided all workshop participants, based on their morning experience, an opportunity to share key learnings relevant to the Principles, insights into demonstrating and assessing ethical research and questions which the process surfaced. Key issues for consideration by ACFID members were identified and are documented in this report. Workshop participants were also invited to develop ideas on practical ways to support NGOs in the conduct of ethical research and development.

## **2.5 Workshop Feedback**

Participants’ feedback on the workshop was positive. Written feedback indicated that the topic of ethics in development research was new to many attending. Those that self-assessed as having a low level of understanding of ethics in development issues before the workshop ranked themselves as having an increased understanding following the workshop. Furthermore, some participants admitted a previous level of scepticism about ethics in development research but recorded a shift in appreciation of the issue following the workshop. As noted by one; “I went from being cynical – “it’s just more hoops and compliance” – to deciding I want to contribute [and] to be involved in this process”.

## **2.6 Definitions**

Existing resources are used to define key terms used throughout this document, as noted below.

**ACFID Principles for ethical research and evaluation<sup>9</sup>** (referred to hereafter as ‘the Principles’)

*“Fundamentally, ethical research principles are about the relationship between researchers (those who conduct, fund and commission research) and research participants. The*

<sup>8</sup> The Workshop Agenda is provided in Annex 1, Background information sheet in Annex 2

<sup>9</sup> ACFID, Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation, p. 5.

*following principles give practical expression to the values underscored in the ACFID Code of Conduct and four core values underpinning ethical research and evaluation:*<sup>10</sup>

- 1. Respect for human beings*
- 2. Beneficence*
- 3. Research merit and integrity; and*
- 4. Justice”*

## **RESEARCH**<sup>11</sup>

This document adopts the definition of research used in the ACFID Principles for ethical research and development, namely that is “*an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight*”

As stated in the Principles, evaluation is included within the scope of this definition “due to the similarities in ethical issues raised in practice”. The Principles note that “evaluation is a type of applied research commonly undertaken by development agencies for the ‘systematic, objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, program or policy’. The ethical considerations for evaluations (that involve human participants) are the same as for other kinds of research”.

In line with the Principles, this document uses the term research to encompass both research and evaluation and ‘researchers’ to also encompass ‘evaluators’.

The Principles are intended to inform all stages of a research process – including commissioning, design, planning, implementation, analysis, dissemination and use.

## **3. Learning outcomes**

This section outlines the lessons learned and guidance provided in relation to the three expected learning outcomes of the workshop. It draws on reflections of the workshop participants and literature reviewed in preparation for the workshop in order to identify various considerations for ACFID and its members. Key discussion points and learning outcomes are summarised in shaded text boxes at the end of each sub-section below.

### **3.1 ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in practice**

The workshop revealed a variety of opportunities and implications for NGOs in applying the Principles in practice. Three key observations can be made, in relation to diversity of development practice, ethics as integral to development practice, and the importance of context.

Firstly, workshop participants highlighted the range of NGO activities where research methods are employed, including evaluations, to which the Principles apply and the potential complications in applying the Principles across all of these practices.

<sup>10</sup> These four core values are drawn from the National Statement (2007) based on six decades of research ethics.

<sup>11</sup> ACFID, Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation, p. 3.

For example, research may be embedded in project implementation or in an evaluation following project completion; it may be carried out by 'in-house' staff or commissioned by external consultants; it may be understood as part of quality assurance, embedded monitoring and evaluation or program data collection, or as a stand-alone exercise intended to influence policy and with no direct link to programming.

Participants discussed the similarities and differences between evaluation and research and the extent to which ethics principles should apply similarly across all types of research-evaluation activities. Whilst the Principles articulate a distinction between research and evaluation, the term 'research' is used to include both, and the Principles are understood to apply to research and evaluation. As described by one participant, evaluation necessarily includes research activities but equally, participants identified the difficulties in determining where to 'draw a line' on the research-evaluation spectrum and what this would mean for the conduct and oversight of NGO research activities. One participant offered a helpful means of considering different types of research, by distinguishing what may require ethical oversight (committee review) from research which simply requires ethical practice. Determining whether a committee review is required is dependent on potential risks to participants, non-participants and researchers, recognising the topic of inquiry, population and local context etc. The workshop identified an interest for ongoing discussion and consideration of how development research (research and evaluation) is practically defined and how the Principles are applied.

Workshop participants also highlighted the diverse range of ACFID member organisations, ranging from large to small scale, and which conduct research in a variety of areas from medical to social research. The diverse range of partnerships with local organisations and Australian Universities for development research was also identified. A number of workshop participants questioned how or if the Principles could apply equally across all of these types of NGO research practices and partnerships, whilst others suggested there should be broad applicability.

*An important learning from the workshop and challenge in practice is consideration and operationalisation of the Principles across the wide range of NGO practices, partnerships and purposes when conducting research. Support provided to NGOs to conduct ethical research in development will need to take into account this diversity in partnerships and application in practice.*

Secondly, workshop participants valued the ethical dimensions of research as a means of promoting good development practice. As one participant suggested; *"there is an opportunity for the Principles to be based on learning and enhance our practice"*. Workshop participants were keen for the Principles to be supported and continually socialised by ACFID and its members as a means of adding value to development, providing support to development practitioners, and ensuring that 'ethical research' was not viewed as simply a question of 'compliance' or an extra burden for staff and partners.

*Key workshop learning was that ethical research demonstrates and contributes to good development practice, while also enhancing development outcomes.*

Thirdly, the workshop emphasised the importance of researchers and practitioners understanding and applying the Principles within the cultural context in which research takes place. As described by one researcher during the workshop, research practice considered ethical in one context may be considered unethical in another. Workshop participants were

keen to ensure that the Principles were not interpreted through a 'western' developed country bias, but understood and interpreted in relation to the local research context. At the same time, participants also appreciated the way the Principles reflect fundamental human rights and are aligned with rather than separate from current frameworks that guide NGO practice such as the Code of Conduct.

*Key workshop learning was that alignment with human rights principles and contemporary development philosophy can be promoted as a strength and rationale for operationalising the Principles in development research. At the same time consideration of specific cultural contexts is critical to the practice of ethical research.*

The various insights developed and lessons learned during the workshop can be related to each of the Principles, as described in turn below.

## **RESPECT FOR HUMAN BEINGS**

Key learning associated with this Principle include:

- There is a need to ensure consistent practice of **confidentiality** protocols across all parts of the research (e.g. recruitment; sharing findings across multiple stakeholder groups; identification in reports or other research outputs (case studies, videos) and training of all researchers and local support staff to ensure confidentiality)
- The question and definition of '**informed consent**' generated significant discussion during the workshop and offers a challenge to researchers, as participants may be consenting but from a position of 'not fully knowing' what they are consenting to. Factors in obtaining informed consent in practice include: accessible (plain language) and consistent information sheets and consent forms; cross cultural sensitivity to appreciate what consent may mean in another context; and the potential need to revisit the issue of consent during research and provide participants with an opportunity to withdraw from research.
- The need to recognise **culture and context** is critical in order to ensure that all stages of the research is informed by and responds to local culture and context and is reviewed and revised as required in changing contexts.

Dilemmas of informed consent discussed during the workshop:

'Informed consent' is complex, and can generate many challenging questions that need careful consideration. Research that involves a necessary deception of participants by the researchers raises particular issues about the nature of informed consent.

...is it ethical to not tell a research participant what the interest or purpose of the research is (i.e. to provide only a vague or general overview of the research rather than detailed or explicit information)? Does this still enable informed consent? Or does it involve a form of deception? What are the ethical implications? Would informed consent be more meaningful if there were a process of check-in and re-confirmation with participants at the end of the research process when they have more knowledge about what they are agreeing to?

*Workshop participants highlighted that respect for human beings in research in development is grounded in an appreciation and response to culture and the local context in which the research is to be conducted. Respect for human beings also*



*includes a concern for establishing and adhering to confidentiality and ensuring free, ongoing and informed consent of research participants.*

## BENEFICENCE

Key learning associated with this Principle included:

- Workshop participants affirmed as centrally important the commitment in the ACFID Principles to “**support empowerment and participation**”.<sup>12</sup> In the words of one participant; “research is ethical when it is *with* a community not *at* a community”.
- **Managing community expectations of research (benefit)** is a key challenge for NGOs. First, an important consideration is who defines benefit, recognising that views of benefit by community members may be different to those held by an NGO. Second, (regardless of shared understandings of benefits) a concern is that expectations are not met and harm is caused. The ‘harm’ caused when definitions of benefits clash, will be different from harm caused when little or no benefit is received contrary to expectations. Third, weighing expectations of benefit in relation to potential harm is another important consideration. For example considering longer term benefits’ for participants of policy change versus potentially high risks of participating in research.
- The complexity associated with assessing potential **risks of research to participants or non-participants** generated in-depth discussions during the workshop, and highlighted the need for thorough assessment and planning in the research design phase. Issues arising included:
  - a recognition that high risk research is not necessarily unethical research – the key to ethical research practice is to identify risk and then design appropriate strategies to reduce and manage that risk
  - the need to consider, identify and address risks for researchers (both local and non-local) as well as participants
  - there is a need to consider risk and beneficence in terms of individual and broader community perspectives, for different groups (and particularly including vulnerable groups) and over both the short and longer term
  - unintended consequences and potential longer term repercussions of research need to be considered. Workshop participants raised the question of duty of care of NGOs in assessing implications of risk beyond the scope of the initial activity; “how long are we responsible for potential repercussions”. Researchers need to consider that the repercussions of their work may outlast their own involvement with a community
  - risk must be assessed within the local cultural context
  - it was recognised that some issues should automatically make an application ‘high risk’ i.e. involving violence or children, which is in line with the National Statement.

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<sup>12</sup> ACFID, Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation, p. 3.

During the Committee meeting members discussed a number of issues related to risk including:

- consider risk within power relations in the local context
- examine components of risk and develop management processes
- consider distribution of burdens of participation and risks across range of research participants
- consider risk in relation to gender relations
- consider risk in relation to local researchers

*Workshop participants emphasized the need to identify community expectations of the research, creating shared understanding and meeting these as a means of ensuring beneficence. They also highlighted the importance of identifying and managing risks for research participants, non-participants and researchers. The interest of development research to empower and contribute to development outcomes was also affirmed.*

## RESEARCH MERIT AND INTEGRITY

Workshop participants affirmed this Principle. During the workshop, participants discussed whether bad research is unethical research. Key learnings associated with this Principle included:

- Ethical research is research that is designed to be **relevant and appropriate to local cultures and contexts**
- Ethical research seeks opportunities to **build the capacity of local researchers**
- NGO practice often requires **flexibility and responsiveness to changing circumstances**, such as political context or natural disasters and ethical research and review processes need to take this into account.<sup>13</sup>

*Workshop participants highlighted aspects of a flexible research design, appropriate to local culture and customs and which supports capacity development of local researchers as key demonstrators of research merit and integrity.*

## JUSTICE

Key learning associated with this Principle included:

- **Inclusion needs to be prioritised** as central to ethical practice (in relation to gender, age, disability, faith, sexual orientation etc.)
- A **dissemination plan to circulate research findings is essential**. Research findings should be communicated in a way that is meaningful to participants; making the most of the results of research findings generally is also part of respecting the time and expertise contributed by participants

<sup>13</sup> The National Statement, p.81 notes that researchers are responsible for monitoring research, providing regular monitoring reports, and advising the relevant HREC of adverse effects, unexpected outcomes and significant changes to research design. HRECs are responsible for monitoring (more than low risk) research.

- Compensation for participating in research needs to be **considered in relation to the specific country and cultural context**

*Workshop participants emphasized the need to consider inclusion, opportunities and potential implications of participation or non-participation to different members of a community. Communicating research findings in a meaningful way was also prioritised.*

### 3.2 **Ethics committee review and NGO demonstration of ethical research**

The Mock Ethics Review process, observations and reflections from workshop participants generated insights in relation to three areas: (1) the committee structure and practice of the committee members, (2) the review process for research applications, and (3) issues for NGOs to consider in demonstrating ethical development research. These are reflected on and described below.

#### **AN ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH**

Workshop participants identified **benefit in having a range of expertise and backgrounds represented in a Committee composition**, in line with the National Statement, which specifies composition of HRECs.<sup>14</sup> In particular the review process highlighted the need for a wide range of technical expertise (i.e. in qualitative /quantitative research methods, biomedical research), sector experience and also country contexts recognising the complex array of NGO development research activities. One suggestion was for committee members with thematic or sector specific expertise, and also with understanding of the culture in which the research will take place to assess relevant research applications.

The need to **address conflict of interest** was raised as an issue. This is in line with the National Statement, which notes that “institutions should establish transparent processes to identify and manage actual and potential conflicts of interest involving (a) the institution itself; (b) researchers; or (c) ethical review bodies, their members or advisors.”<sup>15</sup> Recognising ACFID is a membership based organisation, as one participant suggested, this would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, because for any given application; “applying conflict of interest concerns [means] all the committee members may not be applicable to be on the committee.”

Workshop participants identified the need for **guidance and induction for committee members** to assist them to carry out their roles appropriately. A reflection on the review process was that “the perspective (and review) of members is informed by their own experience, expertise and bias.” The need to ensure critical review in line with the perspective of individuals’ representative roles on the committee is also described in the National Statement, which specifies the need for induction programs and professional development for committee members.<sup>16</sup>

*Workshop participants highlighted that within any review process care is required to identify and manage conflicts of interest, ensure that committee members have*

<sup>14</sup> The National Statement, p.71-72

<sup>15</sup> The National Statement, p.76

<sup>16</sup> The National Statement, p.71

*appropriate expertise and backgrounds to review research applications effectively and are adequately trained and inducted to assess research in development in line with their nominated membership role on the committee.*

## ETHICS REVIEW PROCESS

The workshop promoted in-depth discussion about what participants felt was the **ethos of ethics reviews, and the value of different types and intents of review processes**. For example, participants felt that review processes can be used to ‘test’ research, offer opportunity for critical reflection, or ‘ensure compliance’, such that consideration of ethics in research ‘actually happens in practice’. They can also ‘promote learning’, by actively engaging development practitioners and researchers and strengthening practice. Workshop participants expressed a desire for an ethics review process to provide a supportive rather than judgemental environment for researchers. Comments included:

“The focus should be about better practice, not necessarily a ‘yes/no’ judgement about ethical research.”

“Compliance and learning are not necessarily mutually exclusive...compliance also helps us think about what we need to learn to better what we do, it is a way of focusing and it compels our learning.”

Concern was raised that an ACFID supported review process should **not duplicate existing ethics committees**. The National Statement makes a similar point.<sup>17</sup> One suggestion from the workshop was that through partnerships with academic institutions, existing ethics committees could strengthen their capacity to assess applications for development research, and as such there is an opportunity “influence mainstream ethics with development ethics”.

The review process highlighted the need to **assess ethics consistently across all Principles**. As noted by one participant reflecting on the Committee’s deliberations; “research merit and integrity was widely discussed and [there was] some [discussion] about benefit, but there was minimal conversation around respect and justice”. However these discussions on research merit and integrity could also be understood as an implicit consideration for respect and justice.

The mock review process used **submissions of ‘research applications’** which highlighted **challenges and opportunities** for both Committee members and research applicants. Committee members require a high level of detail to assess the nuanced and complex ethical implications of research. This creates the need for significant details to be provided by research applicants. Even with this detail, not everything a committee might feel it needs to know will be covered, but may well have been considered by the research team in developing the research proposal. Options proposed to streamline this process with researchers included face-to-face committee/researcher meetings, “committee-researcher dialogue”, so queries can be addressed directly instead of exchange of communications, and also requiring documentation on the research design or protocol to be submitted with ethics forms. As one participant suggested: “ethics review is a test of good design – not a support for it...face-to-face and interactive processes could offer more learning opportunities”.

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<sup>17</sup> The National Statement, p.78

*Workshop participants valued an ethos and practice of learning within an ethics review process. Creating opportunities for face-to-face meetings and dialogue between review committees and researchers was suggested as ways to promote learning. As per the National Statement, legal obligations require that research more than low risk is reviewed and approved by a HREC. Workshop participants were keen to ensure that NGO compliance was balanced and complimented with a learning intent within a review process. They also emphasised the need to ensure that researchers are not met with duplication of review processes.*

## ISSUES FOR NGO ETHICAL RESEARCH

Workshop participants noted that **NGO practice is ‘a complex terrain’ and both NGOs and ethics committees need specific guidance to support ethical research in development.** Complexities of NGO practice include: evolving (research) designs; working in trust relationships in country with local partners and communities; power relations associated with cross-cultural research; existing relationships with individuals and communities; expectations and perceived benefits (which may or may not be realistic) that may create inducements to participate in research.

The challenges of **applying ethics principles to the diversity of NGO programs** were identified during the workshop. Workshop participants were keen to ensure that ethics principles were considered, but recognised the challenge in strengthening and applying this practice within the sector.

Workshop participants noted that NGOs often have a vested interest in programming and there is a **need for NGOs to be open to, and not assume, research findings.** Equally there is an opportunity to build on the strengths of NGOs in relation to transparency and child protection.

The review process highlighted the **need for ethical research to address both macro and micro levels of research.** Aspects for consideration included the purpose and focus of the research, research approaches and detailed methods to be used. The review process also highlighted the need for consistency across multiple parts of the research practice, for example; including consistent terminology, language and information in consent forms and information sheets.

*The review process highlighted that NGO ethical research requires detailed considerations of ethical issues at both macro and micro levels of research design in line with all four of the Principles in order to effectively demonstrate consideration of ethics.*

### 3.3 Supporting NGO practice of ethical research in development

Workshop participants suggested a range of ideas and propositions to support NGO practice in ethical research in development. The group also highlighted a range of resources that are already available that could be adapted or adopted for use by ACFID and its members,

including online training programs, guidelines to apply ethical principles in research and online ethics applications.<sup>18</sup>

Participants explored the following ideas for ACFID and its members to advance through small group work.

### **ATTACHING ETHICS PRINCIPLES TO THE CODE OF CONDUCT OR OTHER FORMS OF ACCREDITATION**

Opportunities/benefits:

- Enables a cultural shift within the sector – to increase awareness about ethical practice
- Strengthens the ACFID Code of Conduct which currently lacks any explicit reference to development research.
- The Code currently is viewed as applicable across all NGO activities, which could be explicitly extended to include research.
- Requires consistency in definitions of ethics and consistent application in practice.

Challenges/constraints:

- ACFID NGO code compliance is currently carried out through self-assessment and reporting against the Code of Conduct. Self-reporting always carries risks that the reporting of one's own compliance, including in ethical research, may result in inaccurate, non-transparent assessments.

Options for next steps:

- Undertake research into the ACFID Code of Conduct and encourage stronger evaluation requirements within the Code of Conduct compliance which incorporate ethical considerations.
- Undertake research to demonstrate how 'research in development' expertise can be applied in research at a level appropriate to a variety of development initiatives.
- An addendum (sub-group) to a university based ethics review committee available for the review of NGO research proposals and able to offer support for ethical practice perspective (ethics in development research and evaluation).
- Promote the need among ACFID members to consider ethics in development research as a means to publish research findings.

### **RESOURCES AND GUIDANCE MATERIAL**

Ideas for preparation of resources, materials, guidance and training opportunities including:

- Examples and case studies based on the four principles (e.g. samples of consent processes, communicating research)
- 'Cheat sheets', a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts' or samples of informed consent forms and reference guides for NGOs, (ensuring plain language, easy to translate, graphical to provide to overseas researchers) (e.g. adapt resources prepared by AIATSIS)
- Guidance to match the ACFID Ethics Principles (similar to AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies 2011)
- Make available resources and guidance open-access on an ACFID web-based hub

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<sup>18</sup> AIATSIS, 2011, Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian; National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) for submitting research proposal to Human Research Ethics Committees; university on-line ethic training (e.g. Melbourne, Wollongong).



- Establish a Peer Network for research reviewers with commitments by all participants to reciprocate
- Develop a Reference Group who can support ethical research including:
  - Training materials for local researchers
  - Enriching principles through understanding their application in cross cultural contexts
  - Providing guidance on informed consent in different contexts (according to the four principles)
  - Sharing designs with local experts
  - Develop monitoring tools and processes which enable flexibility and adaptation.

*Workshop participants suggested that there are a variety of relevant existing resources, materials and training programs that can be adapted or adopted to support NGOs to conduct ethical research in development. A thorough assessment of resources will support ACFID in any future development of resources and guidance material.*

## ACFID ESTABLISHED ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

### Opportunities/benefits:

- Provides autonomy for the aid sector – opportunity for leadership and influence in the sector in the longer term, and to shape the type of research undertaken in the development sector.
- Establishes benchmarks for good practice.
- Adds value to the ‘National Statement’ by addressing its shortcomings and adding a development context.
- Serves as a support for capacity building.
- Opportunity for alternative structuring of committee-researcher relationship, enabling face-to-face, real time exchange between committee and researcher.

### Challenges / constraints:

- High cost of establishing and maintaining a committee to review research applications, ability to respond to the wide range of research activities that may come for review.

In line with the National Statement, ACFID and its members may consider different mechanisms of review relating to different levels of risk.<sup>19</sup> ACFID and/or NGOs (in line with the National Statement) could establish and comply with internal ethics processes, and only research assessed to be higher than low risk would be assessed by a HREC. This HREC could be either endorsed by ACFID or accessible through a partnering academic institution (i.e. an existing university ethics committee).

<sup>19</sup> The National Statement notes that different levels of risk (high risk, low risk, negligible risk) can be reviewed by different forms of committees. More than low risk research requires HREC review. Low risk research can be reviewed by a range of different mechanisms with localised standards and protocols that are in line with the National Statement but which do not have to abide by the National Statement guidelines for HRECs. Negligible risk research may be exempt from ethical review.

## PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Establishing a peer-to-peer learning process (NGO-NGO) with a review form supported by Principles in dot point form with 'do's and don'ts' guidance.

Opportunities/benefits:

- Matching peers by country theme/experience could provide better insights in research and ethics, could be much faster (and serve a different purpose) than one central committee looking at many applications.
- May lead to new collaborations (and help with funding issues).

Challenges / constraints:

- Question of who administers and matches NGOs to each other?
- A peer review process is not about compliance, but learning and testing ideas so not a full compliance model as an ethics review process is.

Options for next steps:

- Voluntary opt-in of a pool of reviewers drawing from expertise including monitoring, evaluation and learning, research specialists with country and technical specialists.
- Protocols and time frames will need to be developed with a commitment of peers to review over a couple of weeks (2), followed by a face-to-face discussion, teleconference/webinar to raise issues and discuss.
- Participants could submit full proposal plus address dot points from the Principles.

## DO NOTHING – NO ACTION TO SUPPORT NGOs TO CONDUCT ETHICAL RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT

NGOs continue to carry out research as they have done.

Challenges / constraints:

- Research credibility and integrity is enhanced through ethics review, so this opportunity is lost in the 'do nothing' option.
- Potential for bad (unethical) practice is increased.
- Limited funding opportunities for research that does not have ethics review and approval.
- Missed opportunity to take 'ethically appropriate and managed risks, generate new ideas and improve practice'.
- Research is important to remain competitive in a changing aid environment and for NGOs to promote the issues they are working on.
- NGOs will have to partner with a relevant institution that has access to an ethics committee (namely, universities). Such partner institutions would typically require the NGO to comply with ethical research requirements anyway.

Options for next steps:

- Not considered a favourable option. Workshop participants agreed that some kind of action is required to support NGOs to conduct ethical research in development.

*Workshop participants highlighted numerous ways that support to NGOs to conduct ethical research could be offered. These range from explicit tools and guidance, to training programs on specific issues, encouraging peer review and support and supporting NGO access to ethical review of research.*



## 4. Conclusion

The workshop sought to reveal and explore issues rather than decide upon definitive actions and as such it enabled a range of different views and ideas to be shared.

The mock ethics review process revealed the challenges and complexities of ethical research for NGOs. It also highlighted the importance of ethics in development research for ensuring beneficence to research participants and their communities – in line with the development intent of NGOs. The review process emphasised the need for careful consideration to identify and manage potential risks to research participants and their communities, local and non-local researchers. It also underscored the need for ethics in development research to be understood in the cultural context where the research is taking place.

Through the workshop, participants expressed a commitment to the importance of the Principles and agreed that there was a need to strengthen NGO practice in their use. They prioritised the need to strengthen practice through learning and sharing, and supporting a cultural shift in practice, rather than the adoption of a simple ‘check box’ compliance process. Interest was expressed in ethics review processes that enable dialogue between reviewers and researchers, and among researchers themselves, as many felt that this would encourage an improved understanding of ethics and the development of best practice.

In responding to the question of how best to support NGOs to conduct ethical research in development, a range of pathways were offered and explored (detailed in section 3.3). These emphasised an opportunity for learning, to promote a deeper understanding of the implications and need for ethical review and provide practical and easy to use guidance which strengthens practice. Efforts to support NGOs in the conduct of ethical research in development were grounded in an interest to strengthen development outcomes. Following the workshop, work has continued on the development of draft Guidelines to support the practical application of the Principles, suitable to addressing issues discussed above.

The challenge and opportunity for ACFID and its members is to support NGOs in a way that enables them to demonstrate ethical research in development and to add value to both the broad range of capacities and competencies in the sector and the variety of development initiatives across numerous country and cultural contexts. The workshop participants acknowledged the significance of research ethics and expressed commitment to taking action to apply the Principles to development research in practice.

## ***Annex 1: Workshop Program***

### **ACFID MOCK ETHICS REVIEW PROCESS AND REFLECTION WORKSHOP MONDAY 30 JUNE 2014**

Room G29 University of Melbourne Law School, 185 Pelham St, Carlton

#### **PARTICIPANT AGENDA**

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TIME	TOPIC	FORMAT
9.30 – 10.15	Welcome and Introductions	
10.15 – 11.15	Mock Ethics Committee Meeting	Committee agenda
11:15 – 11:30	MORNING TEA	
11.30 - 1.00	Mock Ethics Committee Meeting (Continued)	Committee agenda
1.00 – 2.00	LUNCH	
2.00 – 3.00	Reflections on Mock Ethics Committee Meeting – What Just Happened?	Collective reflections Small group work
3.00 – 3.45	Big Topics – What do we need to focus on to ensure ethical research in development in the NGO sector?	Small group work
3.45 – 4.00	AFTERNOON TEA	
4.00 – 5.00	Big Picture – What guidance should be provided for NGOs to conduct ethical research in practice?	Small group work
5.00 – 5.30	Closing	

## Annex 2: Background information sheet



### ACFID RESEARCH AND ETHICS PROGRAM MOCK ETHICS REVIEW PROCESS AND REFLECTION WORKSHOP

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology Sydney are working together to develop and document a pilot mock ethics review process and to lead and facilitate an accompanying reflection workshop.

The purpose of this activity is two-fold: to socialise the use and application of ethical principles and guidelines for research (with a particular emphasis on ACFID's recently developed principles); and to support the planned or ongoing research projects being conducted by ACFID members and their partners. If successful, the activity could be used into the future as an ongoing learning activity available to ACFID members.

#### PARTICIPATION IN MOCK ETHICS REVIEW PROCESS AND REFLECTION WORKSHOP

The Mock Ethics Review Process and Reflection Workshop will include participants representing ACFID and ACFID members. Three types of participants will be present at the workshop (1) ACFID staff and members – as participant observers of the process (2) Mock Ethics Committee members (3) [Ethical] research proposal applicants. It is expected that no more than 30 people will be present at the Ethics Review Process / Review Workshop. The day-long workshop is scheduled for 30 June 2014 and being held at the University of Melbourne Law School Room G29.

A Mock Ethics Committee meeting will precede a Reflection Workshop which will involve small group and plenary discussions. Participant discussions will be recorded and form part of the Final Activity Report for this project. The research data gathered from this project will be published in a form that does not identify participants in any way. Data and observations emerging from the activity will be used by ACFID to identify: additional guidance or training that may be required for ACFID members and if/how an institutional ethics process might be made available to support their work.

In the case that information presented in the Final Activity report identifies you or your organisation you will be given the opportunity, prior to publication, to check any text that is to be used in the published report to ensure the meaning was interpreted correctly by the researcher.

Ethical research considerations will be discussed with participants at the start of each research process.

You are free to withdraw your participation from the workshop / this research project, at any time without giving a reason.

#### TEAM

The project is being undertaken by a team of researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and program staff from ACFID.

Dr Keren Winterford will lead the Reflection Workshop and she is supported by Technical Experts: Associate Professor Juliet Willetts, Dr Jane Palmer and Emma Partridge. ACFID support is provided through Research Advisor, Meghan Cooper.

ISF is an applied research centre within UTS. We work across a range of areas relevant to sustainability and equity and have particular expertise in water, sanitation and hygiene. Information about ISF and previous projects is available at <http://www.isf.uts.edu.au/wash.html>.

ACFID is the peak Council for Australian not-for-profit aid and development organisations. ACFID work is to provide leadership, fairly represent and promote the collective views and interests of our membership. Information about ACFID is available at [www.acfid.asn.au](http://www.acfid.asn.au).

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